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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship of overall family conflict and stress to adult personality development in young adult college students from intact families, as compared to young adults who had experienced childhood parental divorce. Seventy-five students from divorced families and 78 students from intact families completed a screening questionnaire that consisted of a demographic questionnaire and an Index of Family Relations, and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2). The findings revealed that, when family stress was controlled for, the comparison of young adults from intact and divorced families did not show differences in adult personality as measured by the MMPI-2. In general, family stress was a better predictor of adult personality development than was family structure. The most important finding of the study was that divorce, in and of itself, was not associated with personality maladjustment in all individuals who experienced childhood parental divorce. From a clinical perspective, the results of this study could argue against the view that divorce is inevitably pathological and could suggest that divorce may in fact have positive outcomes in certain situations. (NB)

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THE ROLE OF FAMILIAL STRESS IN PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT OF OLDER ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED AND NON-DIVORCED FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the late 1970s most of the work done on children's adaptation to parental divorce focused on 1) straight comparisons of children from divorced families with children from intact families, and 2) short term effects of parental divorce. Since the late 1970s, a substantial amount of work as focused on 1) the extraneous variables that moderate the effects of parental divorce, and 2) long term effects of parental divorce (Schlesinger, 1985).

Wallerstein's (1989) recent work suggests that the effects of parental divorce during childhood on older adolescents and young adults is manifested in somewhat different ways than during childhood, but that the impact is certainly strong. Findings from this longitudinal study showed that good psychological adjustment in the children was strongly correlated with the overall quality of life within the postdivorced family. Two factors associated with positive adjustment were: 1) a relatively conflict free postdivorce mother-father relationship and 2) easy access to the noncustodial parent. Conclusions from this work suggest there are some long lasting psychological effects of divorce. Vivid memories of the marital rupture, continuing resentment of parents, feelings of sadness, and a sense of deprivation appear to burden a significant number of young adult children of divorce.

Some of the work in this area has been criticized on several dimensions including biased expectations, methods of measurement (e.g., structured interviews and questionnaires vs. standardized measures), focusing on family structure (intact/divorced) versus family processing, and failing to consider salient moderating variables (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1984; Hess & Camera, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). These issues may produce erroneous conclusions about the impact of divorce on children and adolescents, in that divorce may be seen as the causal variable leading to maladjustment.

One important variable that has been frequently overlooked is family stress and conflict. It is possible that because family conflict tends to remain high in post-divorce families, it is conflict and stress rather than parental divorce that has an adverse effect on children. If levels of family conflict are controlled for, it is possible that children of divorced and non-divorced parents would be more similar on a number of psychological variables than has been frequently reported.

The current study examined the relationship of overall family conflict and stress to adult personality development in young adults from intact families, as compared to young adults who had experienced childhood parental divorce. It was hypothesized that: 1) When family stress is controlled for, a comparison of young adults from intact and divorced families would not show any differences in adult personality development; 2) Family stress would be a better predictor of adult personality development than would family structure

(intact/divorced).

METHOD

SUBJECTS

The final sample (see Table 1 for progression of sample size) consisted of 153 single young adults, 18-23 years old, recruited from undergraduate psychology courses and grouped according to whether or not their parents were divorced (Divorced Family Structure - DFS, and Intact Family Structure - IFS). Subjects were matched on the following criteria: 1) Gender, 2) Index of Family Relations (IFR) Score, 3) Age, and 4) Mother's Education. Characteristics of the final sample are displayed in Table 2.

MEASURES

Two instruments were used in this experiment, 1) the screening questionnaire and 2) the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory - 2 (MMPI-2) (Butcher, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). The screening questionnaire consisted of two parts; a) a Demographic Questionnaire and b) the Index of Family Relations (IFR) (Hudson, 1987) (See Appendix A).

Demographic Questionnaire - This questionnaire sought information on the following background characteristics: age, gender, year in college, family income, ethnic group, parents' educational levels, family structure (divorced or intact), subject's marital status and parental marital status, remarrying patterns of parents, legal custody arrangement, which parent the subject lived with and subject's age when parents separated and divorced.

Index of Family Relations (IFR) - This is a 25-item scale designed to measure the extent, severity, or magnitude of problems that family members have in their relationships with one another. The IFR allows the respondent to characterize the severity of family problems in a global fashion and can be regarded as an overall measure of intrafamilial stress. The IFR has a cutting score of 30 (+/- 5), with scores above 30 indicating that the respondent is experiencing a clinically significant level of intrafamilial stress, and scores below 30 giving no such indication.

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) - The MMPI-2 is a broad-band test designed to assess a number of the major patterns of personality and emotional disorders. It provides an objective evaluation of the subject's personality characteristics; strengths, weaknesses, and personal attitudes. It is one of the easiest personality assessment instruments to administer and score, and can be administered easily to groups of subjects. The test provides internal checks in the event that these general requirements have not been satisfied. The MMPI/MMPI-2 has the respected status as the major personality-clinical test in the majority of clinical setting in the United States and throughout the world.

TABLE 1

PROGRESSION OF THE SAMPLE SIZE

Original Sample Screened
N = 982

Screened Subjects w/o Missing Data
N = 951

Family Structure Subjects Pool
N = 850
DFS n = 182 (94 females and 88 males)
IFS n = 668 (376 females and 292 males)

Family Structure Subjects Pool / Further Participation
N = 170
DFS n = 85 (42 females and 43 males)
IFS n = 85 (43 females and 42 males)

Final Sample / Valid MMPI-2 Profiles
N = 153
DFS n = 75 (38 females and 37 males)
IFS n = 78 (42 females and 36 males)

TABLE 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF FINAL SAMPLE

Age: Mean = 19
Marital Status of All Subjects: single
Year in College: 77 % - Freshman; 17% - Sophomore; 3% - Junior; 3% - Senior

IFR Score	DFS		IFS	
	female	male	female	male
Mean	23.63	34.27	22.83	31.64
Range	0-72	0-81	0-75	0-82

Family Income	DFS	IFS
	52% < $50,000	27% < $50,000
	48% > $50,000	73% > $50,000

Ethnic Background:
91% White; 9% American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, or Hispanic

Mother's Education:
18% - some high school or completed high school
25% - some college credit
31% - completed college
24% - completed masters degree
2% - completed professional degree

Father's Education:
14% - some high school or completed high school
12% - some college credit
33% - completed college
24% - completed masters degree
17% - completed professional degree

Current Marital Status of Divorced parents:
16% - neither mother, nor father remarried
39% - mother single and father remarried
7% - father single and mother remarried
29% - mother now remarried and father now remarried
9% - other

DFS subjects whose mothers had remarried (N=35; 47% of DFS subjects)
66% - mother still married
26% - mother no longer married
8% - mother remarried more than once

DFS subjects whose fathers had remarried (N=60; 80% of DFS subjects)
70% - father still married
10% - father no longer married
20% - father remarried more than once

Legal Custody:
68% - mother had sole custody
5% - father had sole custody
27% - joint custody

TABLE 2 (CONT.)

Physical Custody (Who DFS Subject Lived With)

77% - lived with mother and visited father
3% - lived with mother and did not visit father
5% - lived with father and visited mother
15% - joint living arrangement (defined as living with both parents with minimum time split of 60/40)

DFS Subjects Age at Parents Separation

	females	males
Mean	7.19	8.89
Range	<1-18	<1-19

DFS Subjects Age at Parents Divorce

	females	males
Mean	8.11	9.57
Range	1-20	1-19

PROCEDURE

The screening questionnaire was administered, in four large group settings, at a mass testing session offered to all students enrolled in an introductory psychology course.

The MMPI-2 was administered to smaller groups ranging from 3 to 20 people. Instructions were read by the experimenter. Subjects proceeded to read and sign a consent statement informing them of the general procedures and purposes of the experiment and then completed the MMPI-2. The entire procedure lasted an average of one and a half hours.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHIC

A Group (IFS,DFS) by Variable chi-square analysis was performed on all demographic variables to assess any differences between the IFS and DFS groups. The only variable yielding a significant difference was Family Income, Chi-Square = 14.983, df = 5, $p = .01$. Within the IFS group 27% of the subjects reported family income as less than $50,000 and 73% reported family income as more than $50,000. Within the DFS group 52% of the subjects reported family income as less than $50,000 and 48% as more than $50,000. Refer to Table 2 for information concerning demographic variables.

INDEX OF FAMILY RELATIONS SCORES

A 2 (gender: male/female) X 2 (group: IFS/DFS) MANOVA was computed to determine whether there were any significant gender and/or group differences in scores on the IFR. The results revealed a main effect for gender ($F(1,149) = 7.24$; $p < .01$). IFR scores for males ($M = 32.95$) were significantly higher than for females ($M = 23.21$). No significant differences were found between groups or for a gender by group interaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that the attempt to match the groups, in the final sample, on the IFR variable was successful. It is of interest to note that the same MANOVA computed for subjects from the Family Structure Subject Pool ([redacted]) yielded main effects for group ($F(1,846) = 55.24$; $p < .01$), and for gender ($F(1,846) = 11.55$; $p < .01$). No group X gender interaction was found. IFR scores for the DFS group ($M = 29.13$) were significantly higher than the IFS group ($M = 17.93$). Also, IFR scores for males ($M = 22.87$) were significantly higher than for females ($M = 18.27$).

MMPI-2 SCALES

Analysis of Group Differences - Two (gender: male/female) X two (group: IFS/DFS) MANOVAs were computed to determine whether there were any significant group differences in the T-scores of all MMPI-2 scales. Six MANOVAS were computed with the scales grouped [redacted] as follows: 1) Validity scales; 2) Clinical scales; 3) Content scales; 4) Harris-Lingoes; 5) Wiener-Harmon Subtle-Obvious scales; and 6) Supplementary scales. None of the MANOVAs yielded significant multivariate group differences; therefore, the univariate tests for these

MANOVAs were not examined.

Predictors of Adult Personality Development - To test the hypothesis that family stress would be a better predictor of adult personality development than would family structure, a multiple regression analysis was planned, such that the variables family stress (IFR scores) and family structure (group: IFS/DFS) would be regressed on a summed score, or scores, representing the basic MMPI-2 clinical scales. In order to calculate a summed score or scores which represents the underlying dimension or independent dimensions of the basic MMPI-2 clinical scales, a factor analysis using a varimax rotation was performed on the T-scores of the basic MMPI-2 clinical scales. As a result of the factor analysis, based on a criterion of 1 as the cutoff point for the eigenvalues, 3 factors were retained. These factors accounted for 53% of the variance. The rotated factor coefficients are displayed in Table 3.

It was decided that the best representation of the basic MMPI-2 clinical scales would be 5 scores -- Tension/Isolation (Factor I), Repression/Denial Inward (Factor II), Repression/Denial Outward (Factor III), 4 Pd, and 5 Mf. MANOVAs conducted on the 5 scores yielded no significant gender and/or group differences.

Multiple regression analysis was the final procedure performed. Six analyses were conducted, such that the variables family stress (IFR scores) and family structure (Group: IFS/DFS) were regressed on each of the scores generated from the factor analysis procedure. The six dependent variables were as follows; 1) Tension/Isolation, 2) Repression/Denial Inward, 3) Repression/Denial Outward, 4) 4 Pd, 5) 5 Mf - males, and 6) 5 Mf - females. Table 4 displays a summary of the multiple regression analyses. The results indicated that, in general, family stress was a better predictor of adult personality than was family structure.

DISCUSSION

The two hypotheses of this study were supported. First, when family stress is controlled for, the comparison of young adults from intact and divorced families does not show differences in adult personality as measured by the MMPI-2. And second, in general, family stress is a better predictor of adult personality development than is family structure.

It is interesting to note, from the multiple regression results, that family stress (IFR scores) was a significant predictor of Tension/Isolation (Factor I) and Repression/Denial Outward (Factor III), but not of Repression/Denial Inward (Factor II). One interpretation is that the defense mechanism of "Repression/Denial Inward" is working, that is, family stress has been denied and repressed inward and therefore would not be reported through the IFR, but would possibly be reported as somatic complaints and denial of problems as reflected on MMPI-2 scales 1 and 3 - scales with high loadings on the Repression/Denial Inward factor.

Table 3

ROTATED FACTOR COEFFICIENTS

SCALE #	TENSION/ ISOLATION	REPRESSION/ DENIAL INWARD	REPRESSION/ DENIAL OUTWARD
2 D	.79190 *	.26695	-.17318
7 Pt	.77314 *	.23566	.25397
0 Si	.76030 *	-.02709	-.36327
8 Sc	.69548 *	.24208	.43745
6 Pa	.51864 *	.17626	.15266
4 Pd	.46199	.39260	.37882
1 Hs	.22529	.65070 *	.05215
3 Hy	.15282	.97586 *	-.00461
5 Mf	.14890	.06360	.07433
9 Ma	.03029	-.01093	.75801 *

* Indicates high loading

Scale Names

1 Hs Hypochondriasis
2 D Depression
3 Hy Conversion Hysteria
4 Pd Psychopathic Deviate
5 Mf Masculinity-Feminity
6 Pa Paranoia
7 Pt Psychasthenia
8 Sc Schizophrenia
9 Ma Hypomania
0 Si Social Introversion

Table 4

SUMMARY OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSES

SCORE PREDICTOR VARIABLE	STEP ENTERED	DF	R 2 CHANGE	T FOR BETA	PROBABILITY
TENSION/ ISOLATION					
IFR	1	1,151	.11	4.386	.000 *
GROUP	2	2,150	.02	-1.896	.060
REPRESSION/ DENIAL INWARD					
IFR	1	1,151	.00	.453	.652
GROUP	2	2,150	.00	.456	.649
REPRESSION/ DENIAL OUTWARD					
IFR	1	1,151	.03	2.063	.041 *
GROUP	2	2,150	.OO	.366	.748
4 Pd					
IFR	1	1,151	.19	5.837	.000 *
GROUP	2	2,150	.00	.588	.558
5 Mf(males)					
GROUP	1	1,151	.06	-1.720	.090
IFR	2	2,150	.06	1.180	.242
5 Mf(females)					
GROUP	1	1,151	.02	-.762	.448
IFR	2	2,150	.O2	-.696	.489

p < .05 *

The use of the MMPI-2 is a particular strength of this study in that the key variable, personality adjustment, was measured by using the most widely respected and used personality assessment in the United States and throughout the world (Butcher, et al., 1989; Butcher, 1990; Graham, 1990). Also, most studies concentrate on individual processes and pathology. This study considers family processes and uses a reliable measure (IFR) to assess family stress. Furthermore, when IFS and DFS subjects were matched on the variable of family stress, no differences in personality adjustment were found between the two groups.

Generalizability of these findings may be limited because the sample may not be representative of the general population. Of the original sample screened, only 20% reported that their parents were divorced. This is significantly less than the percentages in the general population. Also, the use of a college population, and reported high levels of income and parental education restrict generalizability. However, subjects in this study were not limited to a clinical population, as are subjects of many such studies.

The most important finding of this study is that divorce, in and of itself, is not associated with personality maladjustment in all individuals who experience childhood parental divorce. This has implications from both a societal perspective and a clinical perspective.

Contrary to societal attitudes and beliefs, divorce does not end the family. Functions of family life, parenting in particular, continue after divorce. The reality that "Parents are Forever" necessitates co-parenting after divorce (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Anderson & Anderson, 1981; DeFrain et.al., 1987; Milne, 1979). According to Milne (1979), co-parenting is more than a decision made by parents. Successful co-parenting is a very difficult process that is frequently undermined by attitudes held by the courts, attorneys, parents, and society. Ahrons & Rodgers (1987), Baden (1980), DeFrain (1987), Milne (1979), Ricci (1980), and Ware (1982) report that indeed society does have a clear attitude toward divorce and people who do divorce -- a clearly negative attitude.

Perhaps this negative attitude is driven by the emotion of fear -- fear that "The Family" is falling apart. Research lends evidence to the notion that society still clings to the long held idea that divorce is inherently pathological and socially deviant (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 1989). Such Ideas have guided the research and clinical writing that has emerged in the past three decades and as a result has influenced our current knowledge base about divorce (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Society must be aware of policies and practices that weaken supports for families or increase risks for adults and children. Adversarial approaches to conflict resolution and support services that fail to consider the family as a whole need to be revised (Camera, 1986). As the data from this study demonstrates, it seems that level of family stress, not just divorce <u>per se</u>, is a predictor variable for personality adjustment. Attention needs to be given to families at-risk

not only because of marital disruption, but also for high levels of stress.

From a clinical perspective, the results of this study could argue against the view that divorce is inevitably pathological and may in fact have positive outcomes in certain situations. Clinicians, especially those who treat children from divorced families, cannot assume that the event of divorce causes maladjustment but that pre-divorce conflict and family processing of the transition following divorce may be at the root of the children's problems. Educational programs are needed for family clinicians as well as parents, children, and workers in the medical, legal, and teaching professions to alert them to potential difficulties, to help them understand the healthy responses each family member may have to divorce, and to identify signs of difficulty that may prevent or retard the development of a viable postdivorce family system (Camera, 1986). Clinicians should also be mindful that, even in intact families, levels of parental conflict and family stress may be a major contributor to psychological maladjustment.

Future research needs to focus on systematic studies of the impact of educational, clinical, and self-help programs which focus on individual and family coping in relation to postdivorce transitions. Also, studies are needed to investigate "what went right" for children who have overcome the effects of divorce. To ask whether divorce is good or bad is neither and interesting nor an important question. How does it work? This is the important question. Research efforts should be directed toward finding the beginnings of a model of normal processes of divorce (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

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APPENDIX A

INDEX OF FAMILY RELATIONS

FOR THIS PART FAMILY INCLUDES ANY OR ALL OF THE FOLLOWING: Mother, Stepmother, Father, Stepfather, Siblings, Step Siblings, or Half Siblings

This is a questionnaire designed to measure the way you feel about your family as a whole. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Answer each item as carefully and accurately as you can by placing a letter (corresponding to one of the responses below) next to each item.

A = Rarely or none of the time
B = A little of the time
C = Some of the time
D = A good part of the time
E = Most or all of the time

___ 1. The members of my family really care about each other.
___ 2. I think my family is terrific.
___ 3. My family gets on my nerves.
___ 4. I really enjoy my family.
___ 5. I can really depend on my family.
___ 6. I really do not care to be around my family.
___ 7. I wish I was not part of this family.
___ 8. I get along well with my family.
___ 9. Members of my family argue too much.
___ 10. There is no sense of closeness in my family.
___ 11. I feel like a stranger in my family.
___ 12. My family does not understand me.
___ 13. There is too much hatred in my family.
___ 14. Members of my family are really good to one another.
___ 15. My family is well respected by those who know us.
___ 16. There seems to be a lot of friction in my family.
___ 17. There is a lot of love in my family.
___ 18. Members of my family get along well together.
___ 19. Life in my family is generally unpleasant.
___ 20. My family is a great joy to me.
___ 21. I feel proud of my family.
___ 22. Other families seem to get along better than ours.
___ 23. My family is a real source of comfort to me.
___ 24. I feel left out of my family.
___ 25. My family is an unhappy one.